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ABSTRACT

There is a popular and pervasive myth that higher education has been a potent social equalizer and great enfranchising vehicle for immigrants to the United States. Historic facts place the vast majority of yesterday's immigrants behind pushcarts or alongside mass production lines, waiting two or three generations before benefiting from the fruits of the U.S. educational system. Today's immigrants, who in New York City are largely Hispanic, find a different society--highly competitive, technological, trading on ideas, skills, and professional expertise. For them, problems such as linguistic isolation, lack of proper education, and lack of technical training lead to semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, providing neither room for upward mobility nor employment stability. The economic viability of minority youth and adults depends upon the success of the educational system. Graduation and retention rates, as well as trends in attendance choice and program interest, cast doubts about the success of the educational enterprise, and raise a number of serious programmatic issues, including the following: (1) to increase the pool of college-eligible minority students, college and high school faculty must collaborate to strengthen the English, math, and science components of the high school curriculum; (2) college adapter programs for out-of-school youth should be combined with effective career planning and education; and (3) colleges must reexamine recruitment strategies and the use of the Scholastic Aptitude Test for students for whom English is neither a dominant nor a first language. The average minority student has little chance of graduating in the absence of total institutional commitment to retention. It is not sufficient for higher education to admit students within its ivy walls; if the student is to succeed, the school must adapt to his/her needs. (EJV)

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THE MYTH OF SOCIAL EQUALIZATION
HISPANICS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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The Myth of Social Equalization
Hispanics and Higher Education

There is a popular and pervasive myth that education in general, and higher education in particular, has been a potent social equalizer in this nation. The myth holds that college was the great enfranchising vehicle for the hords of immigrants who journeyed to this country in pursuit of a better way of life. As in the case with all myths, there was some, albeit scant, truth to it. Some of the earlier immigrants did, indeed find their way into our public universities, particularly what was then the Free Academy, precursor to the City University of New York. But the vast majority of the newcomers, including their children, ended up behind pushcarts or along side mass production lines, as alienated from themselves and the rest of humanity as they had been in southern and eastern Europe. Indeed, the idea of higher education as the historic enfranchising vehicle and champion of the oppressed may well be more myth than historic fact, for it was not until the second or third generations that our citizens of eastern and southern Europe began to truly benefit from the fruits that our educational system had to offer.

Today, New York City continues to be a principle point of disembarkation for immigrants and migrants, but in our time they come from our own hemisphere. They have come North for the very same reasons that their predecessors crossed the Atlantic. They share the same dreams and aspirations and they possess the same resolve to forge a future for

themselves. But they have come to a far different world than that found by earlier generations of immigrants. They come to a society with no room for pushcarts; a world in which robotics will eventually push them from the assembly line and from the sewing machine. In short they find a highly competetive, technoligical society that trades on ideas, skills and professional expertise. The labor statistics bear this out: United States Department of Labor Statistics indicate that in 1962 the Hispanic unemployment rate was over 60% greater than the overall national rate. August 1982 figures cite Hispanic unemployment at 14.6%, or 70% higher than the white rate of 8.6%. Among minority youth in general,unemployment in major cities has reached as high as 45%. While the issues related to the economic viability of any group within a society are many and complex, problems such as linguistic isolation, lack of proper basic education and lack of technical training may clearly be laid at the doorstep of our educational system. Indeed without these skills, any advances made through the efforts of the public and/or private sector can only lead to semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, providing neither room for upward mobility nor employment stability. In short, the extent to which the educational system serves as a successful vehicle for the training and education of minority youth and adults, can in great measure serve as a prognosis for the future economic viability of the black and hispanic community in this country.

Beginning with a relatively small pool of high school graduates - assuming a 60% attrition rate state-wide, as opposed to an 18% attrition

rate among Whites, of those students reaching 12th grade, approximately 60% of all blacks, two-thirds of Hispanics as well as Whites, enter college. However, far less than 55% of the entering Hispanic or Black cohort ever complete their undergraduate degree as opposed to 91% of the white cohort. Taking into consideration the already disproportionately high attrition rate in high school, compounded by a similarly high attrition rate among what should be the lowest risk group in the hispanic community, the pool of trained minority professionals ready to enjoy the fruits of social and economic mobility is so small as to be alarming, with Hispanics representing 3.8% of total bachelor's degrees awarded and only 4½% of the total Associate Degrees awarded.

An examination of attendance choice and program interest is also revealing: indicating a disproportionately low share in engineering and hard science degrees, 3% as opposed to 14% of the general population. At the Masters level Hispanics received a much higher percentage of degrees in education, (38%) than did any other group and along with Blacks are the only group more likely to receive a Masters degree in education in 1980 than in 1976. The actual numbers are revealing: A total of 11 Masters degrees in Biological Science, 14 in Computer Science and 58 in Engineering were awarded to Hispanics in New York State in 1981. In the same year a total of only 57 Hispanics in the State received a doctoral degree (.01% total degrees conferred) not one one of which were in the fields of Physical Science, Computer Science or

Engineering. Clearly the educational gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanics, Blacks and Whites has not lessened appreciably. Even the most superficial examination of the data leads to a number of disturbing conclusions:

. that of all groups, the Hispanic high school youth is least likely to graduate.

. that of all undergraduate college students, the Hispanic is most likely to attrit.

. that on both graduate and undergraduate levels, Both Hispanics and Blacks are dramatically underrepresented in the licensed professions (law, medicine, dentistry, etc.) and in the hard sciences and related high demand fields which lead to true opportunity and socio-economic mobility.

If public commitment to access to quality education as a means to enhance both the material and spiritual quality of life is to be more than rhetoric, then it behooves the educational establishment both in the secondary and postsecondary levels to come to terms with those factors that bar access, limit choice and hinder retention.

We know far too little regarding learning styles, appropriate diagnostic tools, and the methodological approaches best suited for preparing students who do not come with traditional colleges skilled learning styles we do know, for certain, that the student who graduates from high school with severe remedial problems, with problems of first language interference, lacking computational skill and with no real exposure to the sciences in any language is alarmingly high risk as is the adult learner who as sole support of household is attempting to juggle school, work and family responsibility in a linguistically and culturally alien environment. However, even the better prepared minority student, deprived of a variety of role models as well as an effective program of career education in high school is hard pressed to

make informed programmatic decisions and is often tracked intentionally or unintentionally into less competitive and often less rewarding career paths. These factors combined with selective recruitment and in some instances almost total reliance on SAT scores as a predictor of success systematically tracks the many minority students into the Associate degree or low demand baccalaureate programs. Even in the absence of a more fully developed body of research, an examination of minority enrollment patterns along with more recent studies related to student retention in general raises a number of serious programmatic issues.

First, if the pool of truly college eligible minority students is to increase then college faculty working with high school faculty must develop collaborative to strengthen the English, Math and Science components of the high school curriculum; the college adapter programs for out-of-school youth should be combined with an effective program of career planning and education; and colleges must begin to reexamine their recruitment strategies as well as the use of the SAT as a preditor for students for whom English may be neither a dominant nor first language.

Second, once recruited in the absence of total institutional commitment to retention, the average minority student has little if any chance of graduating. Undoubtedly the combination of academic unpreparedness and high aspirational levels in students with poor self-concept, lack of confidence and a distorted perception of academic reality presents our postsecondary institutions with unique and difficult challenges. It is not sufficient for higher education to admit the students within its ivy walls; we must, if the

student is to succeed, adapt to his or her needs. One possible point of departure may be found on examining the college environment in light of the following questions:

1. Is the program of freshmen orientation and advisement flexible enough to provide additional support in the areas of study skills, problem solving and maybe even crises resolution?

2. Does the system of academic support services such as learning labs, tutoring, etc. differentiate between linguistic and conceptual barriers to conprehension?

3. Does the counseling program incorporate a variety of models designed not only to provide a support in traditional areas (advisement, financial aid, etc.) but to develop a group of signigicant others for the student and to instill a sense of belonging in what may often be a alien if not hostile environment?

4. Do the diagnostic testing procedures distinguish between students requiring English as a second language students with first language interference, and students requiring remediation in English?

5. Do the programs of basic skills instruction for each group intergrate content material thereby providing students with both conceptual and linguistic reinforcement.

6. Does the faculty development program promote a better understanding of the hispanic student, thereby reducing the cultural gap between student and teacher?

7. What is the extent of the commitment to provide the hispanic student with faculty role models across the disciplines.

Admittedly, finding adequate solutions is far more difficult than identifying problems. The lack of real research often obscures the direction that curricular modifications might take and the very real problems of high tenure ratios and shrinking resources combined with a severely limited pool of candi-

dates in high demand areas limit opportunity for recruiting large numbers of hispanic faculty. In addition policies such as the new federal regulations governing Food Stamps distribution which now count all student financial aid as income only serve to compound a problem that is already difficult to solve. Consider over 30% of the State's hispanic families have the potential choice between education and food - a cruel and cynical choice at best.

In short, our colleges and universities are faced with a complex and difficult challenge. Yet we in higher education along with our colleges in the primary and secondary levels must step back and honestly assess our existing efforts at promoting the retention of our Hispanic students. The Hispanics together compromise almost 20% of the total enrollment of the City University of New York (the third largest university system in the country). The ultimate success or failure will speak to the ability of the educational establishment to capitalize on their strengths and deal creatively with their needs. Clearly the complexity of both programmatic and policy issues cries out for a commitment to a long term, serious research effort. However, a commitment to research must be coupled to a commitment to action, lest the need for research be used as a shibboleth for inertia. For many Puerto Rican families the second and third mainland generation has come and gone, yet the myth is still only a myth. In a society governed by high technology there is no time to wait another two, three or four generations for the realization of a dream. The tide of immigration has not turned, only now more than ever, we bear the moral imperative to provide both access and genuine opportunity. As educators we must assume the responsibility of turning the myth of higher education into reality for all of our citizenery of today and for the generations to come.

NOTES

1. "Participation in Postsecondary Education in New York State by Racial and Ethnic Categories", September 1983 Report of Bureau of Post-secondary Research, Information Systems and Institutional Aid, State Education Department., Albany, New York.

2. "College and University Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Degrees Conferred MS 1980-81" SED

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Drawn from "Recruitment, Enrollment and Retention, New Students Groups - Higher Education Long Range Planning Group", State Education Department, July 1980.

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